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ABSTRACT

A follow-up study to Stanford University's Teacher Assessment Project (TAP) investigated captioning as a means of making sense of portfolios and explored how the captioning process might provide a way to use student portfolios to link student assessment and teacher assessment. Each of four teachers (three third grade and one fourth grade) from the TAP's literacy component sample, whose portfolios and assessment center performances were rated as impressive, submitted five student portfolios and were interviewed. Each portfolio included a teacher-written caption consisting of five elements: identification of the document; description of the instructional context; explanation of purpose; interpretation of student performance; and application of assessment information to instruction. Results indicated that: (1) all teachers appeared to rely on particular kinds of work samples to assess student progress in both reading and writing; (2) the majority of captions contained descriptive elements but omitted one or more interpretative elements; (3) all teachers felt the task of captioning portfolio documents was novel and time-consuming; and (4) the reflective interpretation that was lacking in two teachers' captions became evident during the interviews. Findings suggest that captions were essential to understand how work samples purporting to show student learning reflected the teacher's instructional intentions. (A thoroughly captioned portfolio document is included.) (RS)

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Running Head: Captions in Student Portfolios

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The Role of Document Captions in Student Portfolios as a Link Between Teacher and Student Assessment

With the current movement toward more holistic literacy programs, the need to develop assessments that provide information about students' reading and writing performances on more natural, holistic tasks has taken on greater urgency. Portfolios appear ideally suited for this challenge. Furthermore, as portfolios are increasingly used for student assessment, their possible use as a means of linking teacher assessment and student assessment becomes apparent. Given the close ties they ideally have to the classroom instructional program, student portfolios -- when used as evidence in a teacher's portfolio -- are potentially rich sources of information about teachers' instructional performances (Wolf,1990).

Teachers can use collections of student work to monitor student growth toward learning goals through the school year. A variety of information in the form of student work samples and self evaluations, as well as observation notes and anecdotal records, for example, allow for rich and multi-textured assessments of student achievement. Portfolios also can help teachers evaluate students' responses to instruction and allow them to show how they made instructional adaptations to students' strengths and needs. Additionally, portfolios may serve as devices for active student participation in the assessment process by encouraging student-teacher collaboration when evaluating work samples collected over time for evidence of growth (Laraway, 1990). Thus, portfolios are particularly attractive for both student and teacher assessment programs

seeking greater fidelity to real literacy learning and teaching (Valencia, 1990; Vavrus, 1989, 1990).

Despite the current popularity of the concept, much of the exploratory research and development to date suggest that there is still a lot we need to learn about the unique characteristics of the portfolio as an assessment alternative. Most developers currently view portfolios as files or folders which include collected samples of authentic student work that gives evidence of teachers' knowledge about student progress. However, a crucial element necessary for an outside audience to make sense of those documents remains missing in this conception. We believe that this missing element is *reflective documentation* (Schon, 1983) -- written teacher (and possibly student) interpretations of how documents indicate growth and progress related to the learning goals of the instructional program. This paper explores the role of teachers' reflective documentation, in the form of document captions attached to specific pieces of student evidence, in student portfolios. Captions are brief, written statements prepared by the teacher that accompany each of the documents selected for the portfolio (Vavrus, et al., 1988) (See Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 Here

The present study was a follow-up analysis of portfolio data collected from one group of teachers who participated in Stanford University's Teacher Assessment Project (TAP) (Vavrus, 1989). The TAP was a multiyear research and development study which investigated the use of

portfolios as an alternative means of assessing teachers' instructional knowledge and skills. During one project phase, researchers explored how collections of performance-based evidence, generated from actual classroom events, would show what teachers know and know how to do when providing elementary literacy instruction (Wolf, Athanses & Chin, 1988).

Twenty-four, third-and-fourth-grade teachers, primarily from school districts in the San Francisco Bay area, developed portfolios of various aspects of their classroom literacy instruction during the 1988-89 school year. After completing portfolio development, the teachers attended a follow-up assessment center simulation where they used their portfolios as the basis for field-testing interviews and exercises about their instructional practices. The quality of teachers' literacy instruction, demonstrated in both the portfolio evidence and assessment center performances, was evaluated using a rating scheme, based on consensus-decision making, developed by project researchers (Vavurs, Bird, Athanases, Chin & Wolf, 1990). Teachers' performances were holistically rated as "Outstanding, Impressive, Average, Weak or Unacceptable" by teams of trained evaluators.

Captions evolved as a form of reflective documentation in the TAP portfolio development process when it became clear that outside reviewers could not interpret the intent of student work samples in the teachers' portfolios (Vavrus, 1989). In effect, captions provided a method of documenting the documents. The TAP developers suggested to teachers that they include five elements in each document caption: identification

of the document; description of the instructional context; explanation of purpose; interpretation of student performance; and application of assessment information to instruction (See Figure 1). Raters reported relying on captions as a valuable source of information in the portfolios that revealed teachers' knowledge and instructional skills (Vavrus & Collins, in press). Our purpose was to investigate the notion of captioning as a means of making sense of portfolios, along with exploring how the captioning process might provide a way for student portfolios to link student assessment and teacher assessment.

Methods

Participants

The four teachers from the TAP's literacy component sample, whose portfolios and assessment center performances were rated as "Impressive," were the focus of this analysis since it was assumed that highly rated teacher performances would indicate exemplary, reflective captions. Three were third grade teachers and one taught fourth grade. Teachers B and D were second-year teachers; Teacher A was a fifth-year teacher; and Teacher C had fifteen years of experience. They taught in schools in suburban and urban districts in the San Francisco Bay area. Each teacher submitted five student portfolios for the On-going Assessment-of-Students entry within their portfolio of literacy instruction, representing the range of student literacy abilities in their classrooms.

Data Analysis

Post hoc, qualitative analyses were used to comparatively examine the data. Two researchers, both former elementary teachers, conducted the analyses. Both also were familiar with the design of the TAP literacy portfolios.

Examination of student portfolios. First, the student portfolios submitted by each teacher were read to characterize the information contained in the written captions attached to each piece of evidence. The five caption elements, identification, context, purpose, interpretation, and application, were used to descriptively characterize caption content. Captions were judged as more or less reflective based on the inclusion of information about purpose, interpretation and application. The kinds of performance samples used to assess student progress also were identified and compared across the teachers to see if document type might affect caption content.

Interview responses. When the examination of captions was complete, the teachers' responses to on-site interview questions and assessment center exercises were examined to determine if teachers' verbal reflections about their assessment practices were consistent with their written reflections in document captions. The on-site interview transcripts provided information regarding how teachers conducted student assessment in literacy during the school year, the kinds of activities they used to assess students' performances, and how they selected the documents included in students' portfolios. They also described the process they had used to develop captions for the student portfolios and how they felt about the captioning procedure. From the

assessment center interviews, we analyzed the teachers' responses to the following general questions about their literacy assessment practices: (1) How does assessment shape planning and instruction? (2) How do you (the teacher) know if students are making progress? (3) What kind of feedback do you give to your students about their performance?

Results

A number of noticeable similarities and differences characterized how the four teachers approached the tasks of selecting documents and providing written captions attached to the evidence in student portfolios.

Kinds of documents in student portfolios

The examination of the five student portfolios submitted by each teacher showed that all teachers appeared to rely on particular kinds of work samples to assess student progress in both reading and writing. Use of multiple samples of a similar type of document collected at different time points (especially students' stories) was a common device to indicate student growth. Three of the four teachers (B, C and D) included excerpts from student literature response logs in which students commented on literature selections they were reading in the classroom at different time points during the year. Teachers B, C and D also included anecdotal notes of observations of students' oral reading or discussion performances. Other documents that were commonly used as evidence in portfolios were lists of books read, rough drafts and revisions with teacher feedback, semantic webs, characters or story elements, beginning/end-of-the-year student autobiographies and spelling tests, skill development assignments from textbooks, and examples of

cooperative writing projects with other students. Additional kinds of work samples were used on a more individual basis by teachers, reflecting instructional emphases in their reading and/or writing programs (Wolf, 1990).

Characteristics of document captions

The examination of portfolios submitted by each teacher showed that the majority of captions contained descriptive elements (identification and description) but omitted one or more interpretive elements (purpose, interpretation of performance and application). The analysis showed that Teachers B and C prepared captions that were consistently inclusive of all three reflective components to show how they viewed the assessment value of particular documents for interpreting student performance relative to their instructional goals. These two teachers included the elements of purpose, interpretation, and application in 100% of their captions (Teacher B and C's portfolios included a total of 44 and 27 documents respectively). Teachers A and D, on the other hand, were far less consistent with the provision of reflective, interpretive information that conveyed reasons for document selection. Teacher A stated the assessment purpose for 43% of her captioned documents (n=30) while only 19% of Teacher's D captions (n=70) included purpose statements. They provided evaluative interpretations of student performance in about one-third of their captions (Teacher A 33%, Teacher D 30%) and both failed to include information indicating how they applied what they learned about student performance to subsequent instruction in any of their captions.

Verbal reflection in interviews

Teachers' responses during the on-site interview about their assessment program indicated that all teachers felt the task of captioning portfolio documents was novel and time-consuming. The teachers unanimously acknowledge that the only reason they captioned documents in their student portfolios was because they were submitting them as part of a teacher assessment. The teachers reported that they had previously collected student work samples in folders primarily to share with parents, but that they did not write reflections to accompany selected samples. Teacher A commented, "I usually keep my thoughts about student work in my head." The teachers did, however, report that the documentation activities they had done to provide evidence of their assessment practices were very worthwhile. Teachers observed that they paid more attention to their students and learned more about their needs, knowing that they had to construct more systematic portfolios of their progress. One teacher remarked that the TAP's assessment activities helped clarify how all the pieces of instruction, assessment and student performance fit together.

The assessment center interviews were designed to probe teachers for reflective information to supplement the written reflections provided in their portfolio if those were judged by raters as insufficient evidence of instructional practices. Thus, for Teachers A and D, these interviews sought reflective information about student assessment not included in written captions. Responses indicated that both teachers were knowledgeable about interpreting students' literacy performances and relating them to their teaching and assessment practices. Both teachers

viewed assessment and instruction as an on-going process, and cited purposes for some of their assessment activities related to their literacy instruction goals. Both teachers confirmed their use of a wide variety of instructional activities for assessment and illustrated how they used work samples from portfolios as a means of judging student growth. In describing the kind of feedback they gave students, both teachers revealed how they used information gained from various assessment methods to plan informed and appropriate instruction.

Discussion

Captions were essential to understand how work samples purporting to show student learning reflected the teacher's instructional intentions. Captions that included all five reflective elements revealed a more thorough picture of the teachers' understanding of the relationship between assessment and instruction. While identification and description of context are necessary to understand the document itself, the remaining three components are those that reveal the most about the teacher's understanding of assessment. The purpose component reveals if teachers have established clear goals for their literacy instruction along with the criteria for meeting the goal. The interpretation element illustrates if teachers are able to make sense out of students' performances and evaluate learning. The application element allows the teacher to demonstrate their ability to make instructional decisions based on the results of their assessment to match instructional methods with student needs.

Our findings suggest that simply telling teachers to provide explanatory captions will not necessarily result in useful interpretive information. As important as the captioning process turned out to be in the TAP teachers' portfolios, it became clear when analyzing the captions of even those teachers rated as impressive that the importance of written reflective interpretation in this kind of documentation process was not well understood.

Even though Teachers A and D did not consistently include interpretive information in their captions, their knowledge and skill as teachers of elementary literacy were still rated as impressive. The examination of the assessment center interviews helped clarify why these teachers received impressive ratings when their portfolios lacked the level of reflective interpretation found in the document captions of Teachers B and C. Their interview responses revealed that Teachers A and D did indeed understand the complexities of the instruction/assessment relationship and appropriately applied their understanding to the classroom. Thus, the reflective information lacking in their written captions was evident in interviews; however, this information could have been easily included in document captions.

Since interpretive information obtained verbally could have been written into document captions, the teachers' responses to on-site interview questions helped us understand why it often was not. The process of preparing written captions was a new and time-consuming one -- sentiments expressed by many TAP teachers (Vavrus, 1989). Lack of time for written reflection, especially when developing portfolios for an

entire class, is a very real constraint for elementary teachers. This may explain why Teachers A and D limited most of their captions to identifying labels and task descriptions. Another reason for focusing on descriptive information in captions may simply be lack of experience in engaging in this type of reflective activity.

While many captions did not include the reflective components of purpose, interpretation and application, the importance of these components in captions has been supported by other programs that have investigated alternative, performance-based models of assessment. Research at the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory found that many teachers have only the vaguest idea of what they are trying to assess, and few have established clear criteria before evaluating student performance. As a result, teachers' assessments of students often are unreliable guides for planning effective instruction (Stiggins, 1988). Without a clear understanding of the assessment-instruction connection, teachers have difficulty monitoring student learning and matching their instructional methods with student needs (Stiggins, 1988). Consequently, even though teachers may find the process of reflecting on their assessment and instruction practices difficult, it appears to be an important component of effective teaching. Regarding portfolios, it would be difficult for teachers with limited knowledge of literacy assessment methods to independently design and implement a portfolio-based assessment plan which meaningfully linked student learning to instruction.

As noted by all four teachers, however, time was the biggest constraint to the captioning process. Time to prepare written reflections repeatedly emerges among classroom teachers as a major drawback of portfolios that will have to be dealt with by those seeking to implement portfolios in their assessment programs, especially if reflective interpretations that enhance the independent cohesiveness of portfolios is viewed as important. As shown by Teachers B and C, interpretive and descriptive information in captions suggests that portfolios can independently convey teachers' knowledge and expertise in instruction and assessment without the need for follow-up interviews.

Another serious constraint for portfolio development is lack of knowledge about assessment methods and how to be reflective. This study analyzed four teachers' impressive performances. In the TAP sample that leaves twenty other teachers who displayed average or weak instruction in their portfolios. For large scale implementation, teachers involved in portfolio development will need systematic and strong staff development support that focuses on how to document student performance and how to reflect on their instructional methods, particularly as these relate to student assessment (Stiggins, 1988). Clearly, one-shot inservice presentations about portfolios development will not do the trick.

In spite of the teachers' viewing the captioning process as overwhelming and time-consuming, and reflection as rather intimidating, they still attached a high degree of value to the student assessment activities. The teachers not only believed that assessment was a very important part of literacy instruction, they also indicated that they

gained a great deal of knowledge about their students' literacy development by engaging in the reflective process necessary for portfolio development. It appears that portfolio development orients teachers' thinking about the relationship between assessment and instruction in ways that can potentially benefit student learning (Valencia ,1990).

This paper suggests that one possible way of linking teacher assessment and student assessment is through document captions. Teachers select work samples for a student's portfolio to illustrate student performance and/or growth in literacy. Consequently, these artifacts provide the basis for the student assessment component. Actual work samples and anecdotal/observational records can provide evidence of student performance but they reveal little about the reasons for document selection or the connection of student performance to instruction. Therefore, some form of written, reflective commentary attached to pieces of evidence is apparently helpful. Reflective evidence helps to distinguish portfolios from mere "collections of stuff," and allows outsiders reviewing portfolio contents to see how teachers judged the quality of student performance and related it to the instructional program (Vavrus, 1990).

The role of reflective documentation in portfolios has implications for portfolio development programs that focus on the identification of work samples rather than on teacher reflection about what the work samples show about student learning. Simply collecting samples of instructional activities tends to treat teaching as a product and provides limited access to the thinking processes that shape instructional decisions and as a

result, provides little useful information for teacher assessment. Captioned collections, however, can provide information about the process of teaching, as well as the products. In this way, document captions provide a means for student portfolios to serve audiences interested in either student assessment or teacher assessment by providing information simultaneously about student progress and the ability of teachers to interweave instruction and evaluation processes.

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Figure 1

Thoroughly Captioned Portfolio Document

Document Caption
Teacher B

Date: 9/9/88

id: Web from Humphrey. This is a web done independently by the student after reading a book of her choice.

Descrip. I teach the students to use semantic webs as an aid for collecting information about a topic or character. This student had read the book independently and was asked to do a semantic web for the main character.

Explan. of Purpose: Semantic web on the main character helped me find out if the students understood the basic process of acquiring and organizing important inf. about a character and was ready to more on to identifying the evidence in the text that gave the information.

interp. From the student's web, I saw she was a careful reader who could collect and record the most important information about the character (that which makes the character special) but that she had recorded only literal info and had done no inferencing.

Application: From this semantic web exercise I know I need to encourage the students to use what the book tells them to form their own opinions about the main character.